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# BLSS, A European Approach to CELSS

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Å. Ingemar Skoog
Dornier System GmbH
Friedrichshafen, Federal Republic of Germany

ABSTRACT

Controlled ecological life support systems (CELSS) have for some years been subject to intensified studies and experiments in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and in Europe and Japan as well in recent years.

The presently planned Space Station concepts foresee an early implementation of water and oxygen recovery in order to reduce resupply weight and volume. In view of expected increase in station and crew size the spacecraft payload limitations will require that the carbon, or food, recycling loop, the third and final part in the life support system, be closed to further reduce logistics cost. This will be practical only if advanced life support systems can be developed in which metabolic waste products are regenerated and food is produced.

Dornier System has in recent years undertaken an effort to define requirements and concepts and to analyse the feasibility of a Biological Life Support System (BLSS) for space applications. Analyses of the BLSS energy-mass relation have been performed, and the possibilities to influence it to achieve advantages for the BLSS (compared with physico-chemical systems) have been determined. The major problem areas which need immediate attention have been defined, and a programme for the development of BLSS has been prosed.

A feasibility study of a closed life support system for plant and animal experiments in space has been initiated and results will be verified by bread-board testing of selected alternatives. The principle is to form a chain of ECO-groups consisting of food producers, consumers and decomposers, of which one (plants or animals) will contain the life science test species. Considered possibilities are combinations of aquarium concepts, algae reactors and vertebrate vivaria.

This paper discusses the BLSS feasibility analyses activities performed in Europe, the ongoing experimental/development work and future planning for European BLSS activities.

FOR EXTENDED DURATION MISSIONS in space the practical supply of basic life-supporting ingredients represents a formidable logistics problem. The weight at launch and the storage volume in weithlessness of water, oxygen and food in a conventional non-regenerable life support system are directly proportional to the crew size and the length of the space mission. In view of spacecraft payload limitations, the inescapable conclusion is that extended-duration manned space missions will be practical only if advanced life support systems can be developed in which metabolic waste products are regenerated and food is produced.

Only a Biological Life Support System (BLSS) *, which not only satisfies the space station environmental control function requirements, bus also closes the food cycle, can meet all the expected requirements. A BLSS must be a balanced ecological system, biotechnical in nature and consisting of some combination of human beings, animals, plants and microorganisms integrated with mechanical and physico-chemical hardware.

* Biological Life Support System (BLSS) is synonymous to Controlled Ecological Life Support System (CELSS) in this paper.

Numerous scientific space experiments have been delineated in recent years, the results of which are applicable to the BLSS concept. To ensure that the efforts expended by various international bodies aim toward a common goal, the coordination with existing Spacelab and Shuttle utilization programmes is of major importance to avoid duplication of effort and to gain access to valuable data as early as possible. The analysis reported here is a result of a cooperative effort undertaken by Dornier System and Hamilton Standard in recent years to define requirements and concepts, and to analyze the feasibility of BLSS for space applications. The development of BLSS relevant experiments has also been initiated in Europe.

STATE OF THE ART

The development of manned space activities will most likely continue along the evolutionary lines that have so successfully guided the space programme to date. Along with progressively growing crew sizes, mission duration and complexity have increased dramatically since the first orbital flights in 1961 - 1962. Mission duration has progressed from the one to three orbits of the first Vostok and Mercury flights to the 84 days of the third Skylab flight and the 211 days of Salyut. From the initial, single objective of survival, mission objectives have increased to the achievement of major experiments, and the accomplishment of major operational missions, such as satellite launch, deployment, capture, repair and redeployment.

The Space Transportation System (STS), Shuttle Orbiter and Spacelab, are opening up the future expansion of manned space activities. The baseline STS capability is a seven day on-orbit mission.

Future use of space stations and larger scale operations are forecasted to continue in a progressive manner [1]*. In concert with the evolution of man's activities in space, the technology to support these activities will require progressive development of today's space systems. Of major importance is the life support system. The latest U.S. and European manned space vehicles, the Space Shuttle Orbiter and the Spacelab, contain the same life support systems with expendable supplies, such as the systems used on the earlier manned space flights. However, the next phases of manned space flight development will provide substantial impetus to improve life support technology, and to reduce the dependency upon these expendable technologies. Figure 1 shows how improvements in life support technology might be implemented in conjunction with the mission growth scenario.

* Numbers in parenthesis designate references at end of paper.

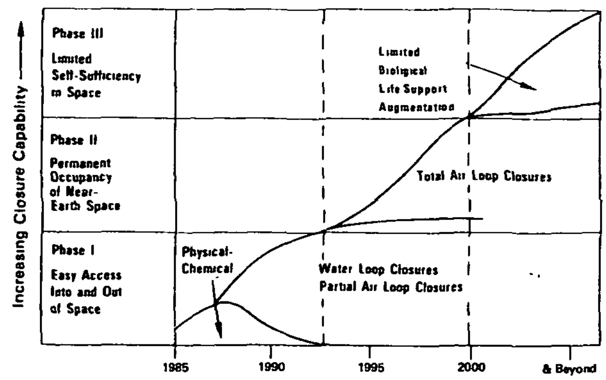


*Fig. 1 - Prospective evolution of life support systems [1]*

The next U.S. and European manned space objective is a Space Station. This permanently manned facility will be resupplied on 90-day intervals and have a crew size of 6 - 8 astronauts. Such an in-orbit system is envisioned to have a large role in the commercialization of space activities, as well as playing a key role in continued development of space technology, primarily in the area of in-orbit operations. Because resupply from Earth of metabolic expendables ($O_2$, clean $H_2O$, food) incurs a high launch cost the Space Station life support system is expected to regenerate water and oxygen.

Beyond the initial Space Station, future manned space missions include various missions that require large teams of humans working and living in space for extensive periods of time in permanently-inhabited large space stations. These space habitats will require the carbon loop to be closed to further reduce logistics costs. This recycling of carbon will only be practical if advanced life support systems can be developed in which metabolic waste products can be used to produce food (Figure 2).

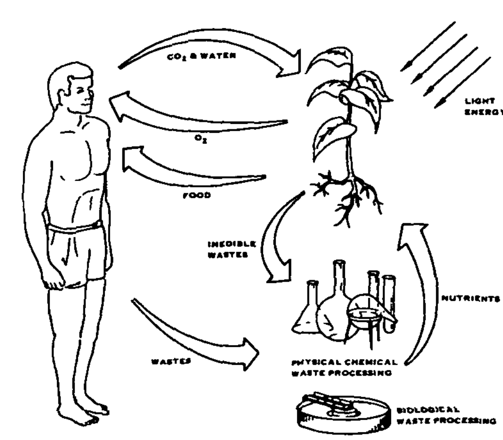


Fig. 2 - Principal Biological Life Support System (BLSS)

Initial efforts to investigate advanced life support systems of the ecological/biological type to close the carbon loop (food supply), Figure 3, have been undertaken in the U.S. (Controlled Ecological Life Support Systems, CELSS) and in Europe (Biological Life Support Systems, BLSS) in recent years. During this decade, continuing efforts will concentrate on feasibility studies, investigations of specific development issues, and flight experiments to prove the viability of selected detailed designs or to provide basic scientific information in preparation for large scale testing on board a space station in the 1990's. A indicated in the literature, intensive experimental studies concerning BLSS are also being conducted in the U.S.S.R. and Japan as well. Both terrestrial and space experiments are being planned or performed.

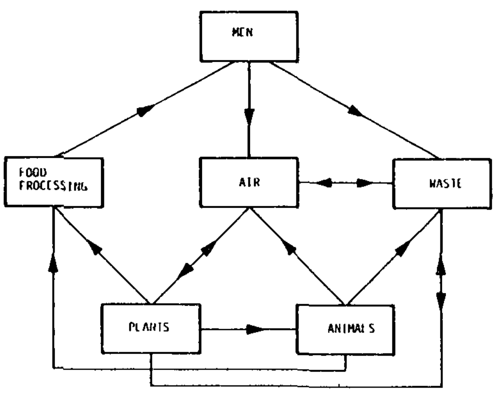


Fig. 3 - Principle carbon mass flow in a closed system (BLSS)

The benefit of BLSS is primarily an economic one, because the cost of launching supplies into orbit to support manned space activities can be reduced by the use of a BLSS. The first, and relatively near potential application for BLSS is on a space station in a low earth orbit (LEO). An estimated systems trade-off between a non-biological (physico-chemical) regenerative system and a biological system with ∿80% food closure is given in Figure 4.

Depending on the mission type and crew size the pay off varies from 6 - 7 years for a 4-man crew to about 1 1/2 year for a 100-man crew in LEO.

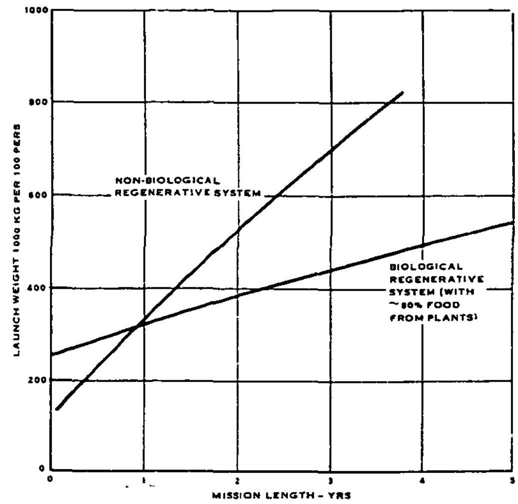


Fig. 4 - Estimated system trade-off for life support system alternatives

BLSS REQUIREMENTS

In defining BLSS characteristics, it is important to consider potential space applications, which dictate BLSS functional requirements. A permanently manned space station or base has been used as the model for the following BLSS discussions, because this application embodies the essential complexities of most BLSS uses. As BLSS will represent only one of many subsystems integrated to form the space station, the BLSS design must take into account all potential inputs (e.g., gases, chemicals) from other subsystems if the resulting space station ecology is to be balanced and stable.

Space station life support functions can be more definitively specified as:

- Oxygen Production
- Carbon Dioxide Control and Reduction
- Contaminant Gas Control
- Two Gas Control and Pressure Regulation
- Humidity Control
- Thermal Control
- Solid Waste Reclamation
- Waste Water Reclamation
- Radiation Protection
- Illumination
- Artificial Gravity
- Food Supply (production and supply).

Ultimately, BLSS functional requirements for space application will be to supply oxygen, water and food for support of human life on a continuous basis, while maintaining a balanced, stable spacecraft ecology. The BLSS must satisfy both the Environmental Control and Food Production functional requirements of the space station listed above. While the precise BLSS components will be highly dependent on the space mission, it will probably consist of humans, animals, plants and microorganisms integrated with other supporting physicochemical components.

In an ideal scenario, a BLSS would be capable of perfect:

- metabolic balance between man's oxidative process and plants regenerative process,
- waste water reclamation, and
- mass-balanced regenerative food/waste cycle.

The closed system as presented in Figure 5 would represent this case. In a closed system, where the food supply might include both animal and plant species, no unusable residues would be produced. That is, a perfect regerative balance of input and output quantities from human, animal and plant species would be maintained. In practice, however, total BLSS closure will not be achievable. At best, BLSS closure will be approached incrementally and only after intensive biological research effort.

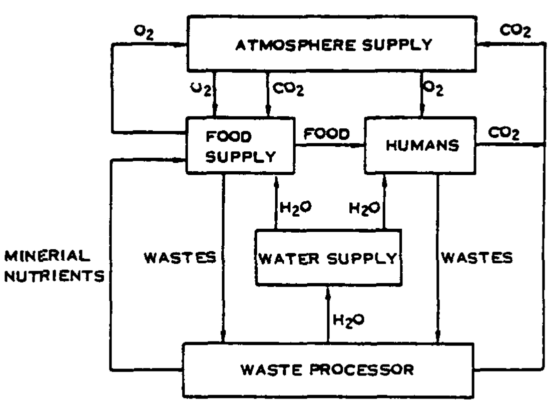


Fig. 5 - Closed BLSS

To expand upon the concepts introduced above, the BLSS must be balanced in the sense that proper proportions of $CO_2$, $O_2$, biomass, water, food reserves, etc., are maintained. The precise nature of this balance relates directly to BLSS's regenerative ability to convert waste products to usable products. In any practical BLSS, supplement additives to the system will periodically be required to maintain the desired ecological balance, because some unusable waste residues will always be produced. Such BLSS systems are said to be partially closed, Figure 6.

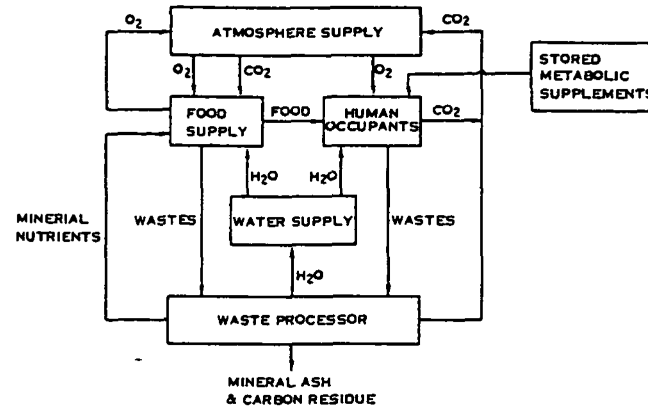


Fig. 6 - Partially closed BLSS

Assessing the required life support functions (oxygen supply, food production and water reclamation) for a BLSS indicates that the food production requirement is the design driver for higher plants. A system sized for food production will be in the position to handle the other life support functions without an increase in size. Analyses of the BLSS energy-mass relation have been performed, and it appears possible to achieve advantages using the BLSS compared to physico-chemical systems. At equal energy consumption for a BLSS and a physico-chemical system, the break-even point of mass is in the order of 7 years. If the phototrophic efficiency could be increased over the 2% used in this analysis the energy consumption would be higher for the BLSS, but it would show a weight advantage for shorter mission durations [2].

## BLSS DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

The development of an operational biological life support system for space requires dual development paths [2]. In parallel to the selection of species plants and animals, the improvement of culturing methods and of waste treatment by experimental investigations, and mathematical models will be needed to decrease development risks of the prototype BLSS.

The development process (Figure 7) starts with the specification of the human diet and the vitamin and trace mineral requirements. Compatible with these human requirements and the environmental conditions of a space station, the next step would be to select the plant and animal species required. This selection will be reevaluated and retested as the development of a BLSS makes progress in the following areas:

- higher yield of cultures,
- waste treatment, and
- control mechanisms.

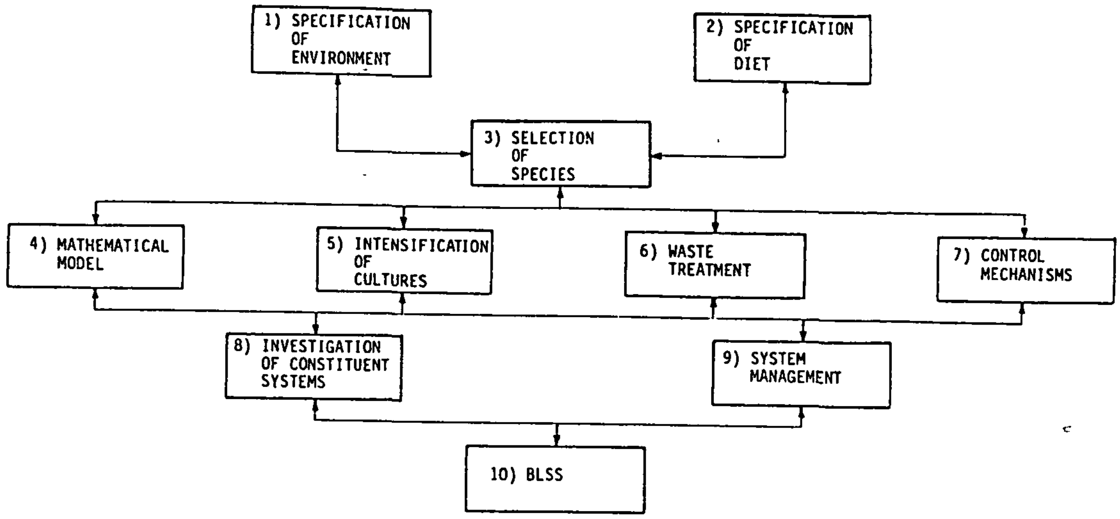


Fig. 7 - Idea of the development process of a BLSS

Many single experimental investigations in various disciplines will be necessary for the evaluation of the biological, chemical and technical basis for these areas before they can be integrated into subsystems, whose functional coupling and reliability under working conditions can be tested.

The theoretical approach, going hand in hand with the experimental one, will use mathematical models. These mathematical models should describe the functional couplings between all system components as well as their dynamic behaviour. The models should also define system stability and eventually form the basis for computerized control and management of the system, including problem prediction, trend analysis, crop forecasting, and logistical requirements predictions.

The early state of development of the BLSS system is reflected by the large number of issues yet to be resolved in the definition of an operational system. Table 1 summarizes some basic developments yet to be undertaken in the areas of environment control, agriculture, aquaculture, food synthesis and processing, diets, and waste conversion. A development programme as outlined in Figure 7 is envisioned to sequentially address these issues in the development of a BLSS system [2 & 3].

Within the large list of BLSS issues to be resolved, there are a number of early technology tasks that can be performed in an initial test and development programme to lay a technological foundation for the eventual BLSS system evolution. These early key tasks are listed in Table 2.

These problems have to be subdivided into ones that absolutely require studies in space, and ones that can be studied and solved in terrestrial research programmes. Furthermore, priorities should be set as to whether the problem is relevant in the very near future (short-term relevance, pre-pilot type) or not (long-term relevance, pilot type).

Table 1 - Basic BLSS Development Issues

| REQUIRED BLSS SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENTS |
|---|
| <u>Environment</u><br>- Materials selection<br>- Atmosphere selection<br>- Gravity selection<br>- Radiation shielding requirements and mothodology<br>- Ecosystem tradeoff studies<br>- Chemical analysis and control of contaminants and toxicants<br>- Illumination requirements<br>- Solar reflectors and filters |
| <u>Management and Control</u><br>- Critical biological performance parameters<br>- Biological sensor development<br>- Definition of biological stability criteria<br>- BLSS mathematical models<br>- BLSS management and control philosophy |
| <u>Agriculture</u><br>- Plant culture and physiology in space environments<br>- Concepts to reduce spatial requirements<br>- Equipment concepts for cultivation and harvesting<br>- Radiation effect on genetic drift germination<br>- Plant growth without soil<br>- Forced growth effects on plants<br>- Plant cycle photosynthesis efficiency<br>- Plant hormone activity in micro-gravity<br>- Plant production of toxic gases |
| <u>Aquaculture</u><br>- Food-producing ecologies based on waste conversion<br>- High yield, high nutrition plant production and harvesting<br>- Photosynthesis process |
| <u>Food Synthesis</u><br>- Acceptable microbiological sources and production methodology<br>- Acceptable chemical synthetic production of protein and carbohydrates |
| <u>Food Processing</u><br>- New concepts for food preparation processing, storage, and distribution to reduce equipment and resource requirements<br>- Improved food preservation and packaging methods |
| <u>Diet Planning</u><br>- Human nutritional requirements<br>- Food and food-source selection criteria<br>- Nutritional equivalency of various food sources<br>- Physiological and psychological acceptability aspects of nonconventional diets and food sources<br>- Definition of crop/plant scenarios<br>- Digestive tract adaptability |
| <u>Waste Conversion and Resource Recovery</u><br>- Physico-chemical processes, particularly mineral separation and recovery<br>- Microbiological processes<br>- Regenerative chemical filters<br>- Chemical separation methods<br>- Auxiliary non-food products from wastes (e g , paper and tools)<br>- Plant waste byproduct processing. |

Table 2 - Problems to be Studied in Early BLSS Development

| TASK | Pre-Pilot Type | | Pilot Type | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Terrestrial | Space | Terrestrial | Space |
| 0-g influence during cultivation | x | x | | x |
| 0-g influence on culture-methods | x | x | | x |
| Solar radiation in PAR region impact on biological material | x | | x | x |
| Cosmic radiation | x | x | | |
| Optimization of biological material | x | (x) | x | |
| Optimisation of cultivation methods | x | (x) | x | |
| Optimization of harvesting methods | (x) | (x) | x | x |
| Energy recycling | x | | x | |
| Waste recycling | x | | x | |
| Monitoring and Control | x | x | x | x |
| Improvement of mathematical modelling | x | | x | |
| Selection of diet | x | | x | |
| Development of large area windows for PAR and IR | x | x | x | x |
| Refined theoretical model | x | | x | |

( ) = need for exp. still to be defined
PAR = Photosynthetic Active Region
IR = Infrared

Generally speaking, only those problems need to be studied in space, which:

(i) require a micro-gravity environment, and/or

(ii) are cosmic radiation dependent.

As to i), perhaps problems arising in the micro-gravity environment of a BLSS may be solved on earth by studying the problems under increased g-force levels and directional attitudes of gravity, and then extrapolating the results to 0-g. This approach, in connection with sophisticated mathematical modelling, might be successful. If experiments have to be conducted under micro-gravity, it seems possible that only verification experiments may be necessary.

As to ii), it is clear that the simulation of cosmic radiation on earth is very difficult, and that appropriate experiments may have to be performed in space. However, the composition of cosmic radiation and its distribution in space is relatively well known, so that first order approximations are possible for certain experiments.

For all experimental activities, a prerequisite is that they focus on the applicability of certain biological features for BLSS. Therefore, questions concerning problems of basic life science are not to be studied, but results of such experiments might provide answers to certain questions relevant to BLSS.

PRE-PILOT STUDIES - should center around the problem of providing the crew with a certain amount of fresh greens. The culture methods are characterized by the use of prepared beds or pots which contain a medium either in the form of solid fertile 'soil' (agar plate) or spongelike substances. The interface of the BLSS with the spacecraft and with outer space (sunlight) should be as simple as possible. Direct sunlight would be preferred from an energy point-of-view, but because of multiple light-dark periods during each 24-hour day in low earth orbit, solar powered artificial light may be required.

The harvesting process should take place by cutting plants during their vegetative period. Species able to perform vegetative reproduction should be selected to shorten the duration between the harvesting periods; the generative period during growth should be by-passed. Vegetative reproduction is usually supported by the method of stem-cutting. This method is also less crew-time consuming than sprouting from seed.

PILOT STUDIES - focus on the design and testing of a terrestiral reference system which simulates the life support system with its biological subsystems intended for flight application. Reference systems have in the past been designed and tested along with the development of physicochemical subsystems.

Whereas in pre-pilot studies principle aspects of BLSS are experimentally investigated, the aims of pilot design and testing of a reference system are to verify the selected principles for the closure of the water, atmosphere and carbon loops as a system. The successful experimental work performed to date with such systems led to the conclusion that the concept of a reference system is valid. Pilot studies should include both terrestrial and space activities.

It is only in the final stage of the development of BLSS that pilot studies will occur in space. At this stage of development, complete biological subsystems are flown, possibly as some kind of parallel system to physico-chemical subsystems, activated only during a certain phase of the mission. Such a mission will occur before complete BLSS are implemented as the main life support system.

## DEVELOPMENT OF BLSS EXPERIMENTS

The BLSS studies have indicated two blocks (pre-pilot and pilot type) of experiments and analysis which are required for the support and promotion of the development of BLSS (Table 2). The development of specific flight experiments should follow the generalized flow diagram in Figure 8. This approach takes into account the known typical BLSS design parameters for different types of species, and can also be used for

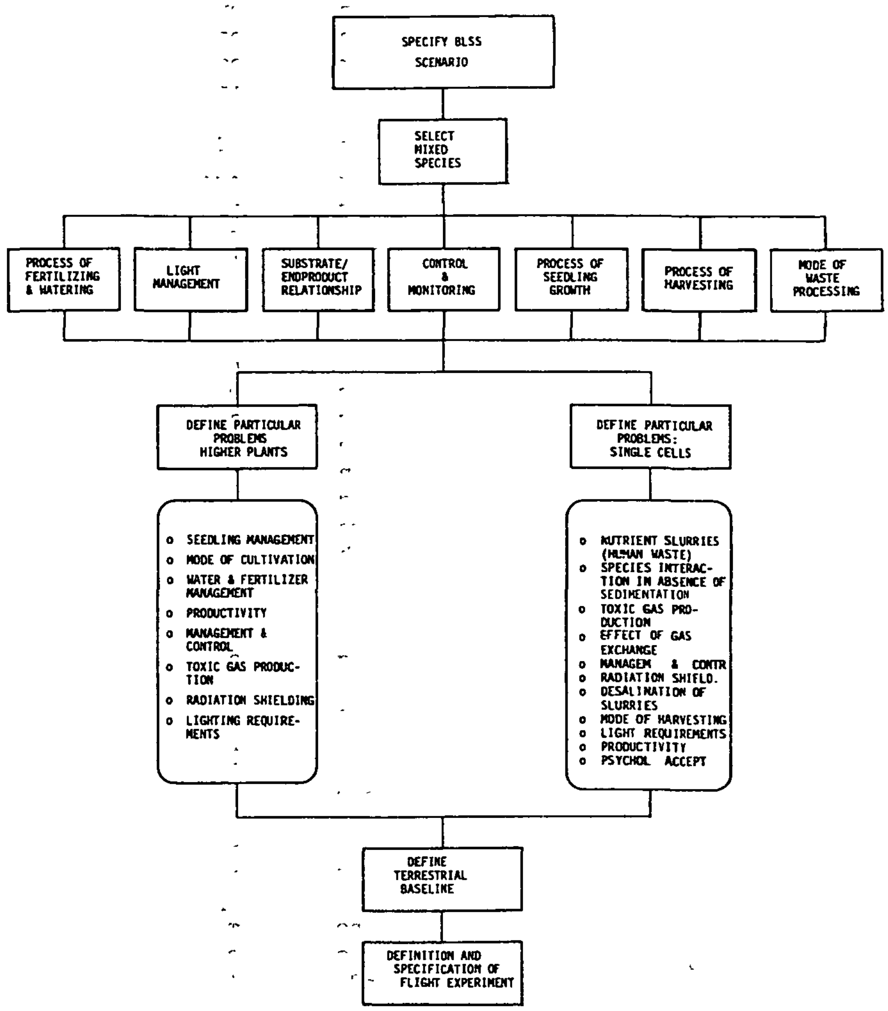


Fig. 8 - Development of flight experiments for BLSS

the definition of new BLSS flight experiments and to evaluate modifications to planned expements. A preliminary programme has been proposed indicating some potential BLSS experiments. These experiments investigate those areas with immediate impact upon the successful integration of a regenerable life support system into future manned space activities.

Tasks of immdiate importance from a life support system development point-of-view are:

- investigations concerning micro-gravity,
- investigations concerning cosmic radiation,
- development of large area windows for radiation in the PAR-region,
- investigations concerning harvesting and cultivation in micro-gravity,
- monitoring, control and sensor technology, and
- waste processing.

Cosmic radiation studies are already planned, but those experiments dealing with micro-gravity and PAR-windows are only partly defined. Any efforts related to the PAR-windows should include systems analysis studies in the areas of:

- the correct wavelength needed for optimum growing conditions,
- avoidance of excessive heat load into the spacecraft, and
- use of day/night growing cycles.

Concerning the cosmic radiation investigations, advanced experiments are planned and, in this case, the interpretation of results, and the subsequent influence on species selection are the major tasks in the BLSS development.

New experiments should have the dual goal of advancing the basic scientific research while meeting the BLSS requirements.

Presently two projects are being performed in Europe with a direct link to BLSS:

- Solar Plant Growth Faciltity (SPGE) and
- Environmental Life Support System Technology Study (ELSS).

SOLAR PLANT GROWTH FACILITY - The Solar Plant Growth Facility is to be designed as a reusable life science facility rendering possible investigations with respect to future biological life support systems (BLSS).

By conducting long term experiments (about 6 months), the results should be useful to enhance the technological background needed for the development of BLSS; for this purpose a certain biological sample is exposed to well defined environmental conditions in a low earth orbit and factors which are expected to influence the design of BLSS (metabolism, survival rates, morphogenesis,..) are studied. By this way, one will gain experience in handling and cultivating larger amounts of biological material necessary for providing food and a suitable atmosphere in future manned space missions.

The data collected inflight shall establish information on:

- Metabolism of the plants, that is
  - . $O_2$-production and consumption
  - . $CO_2$-consumption and production
  - . $H_2O$-transpiration,
- Morphogensis of the plants,
- Development of flowers and seeds,
- Regeneration after cutting, vegetative reproduction,
- Light input to the plants
  - . total amount
  - . cycle (60 min. day, 35 min. night), and
- production of gaseous trace contaminants (e.g.$C_2H_4$).

The principle schematic of the SPGF is given in Figure 9. The overall dimensions are 660 x 1360 x 900 mm and the overall weight 152 kg. Technically the SPGF will be used to verify:

- the illumination concept (window and shutter),
- the atmosphere regeneration and gas supply (absorption of $CO_2$, absorption of $O_2$ and supply of $CO_2$),
- observation methods,
- proposed stem-cutting concept,
- proposed pollination concept,
- watering and nutrient supply concept, and
- thermal humidity and dehydration schemes.

A breadboard unit of the SPGF is shown in Figure 10.

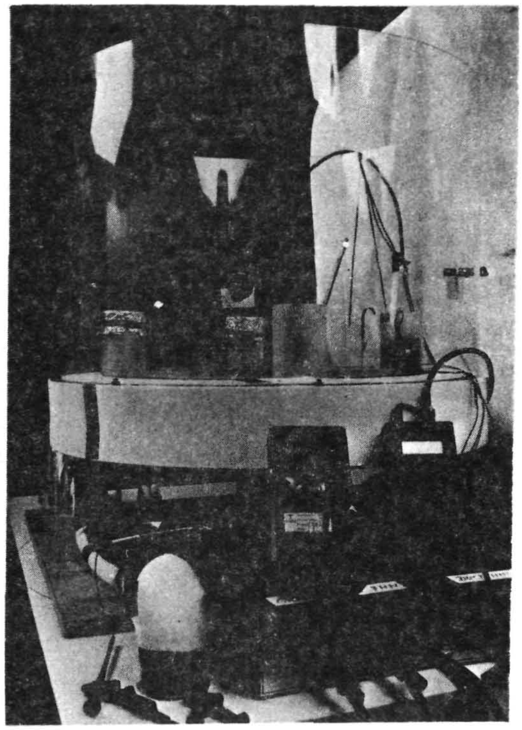

Fig. 10 - SPGF Breadboard Model

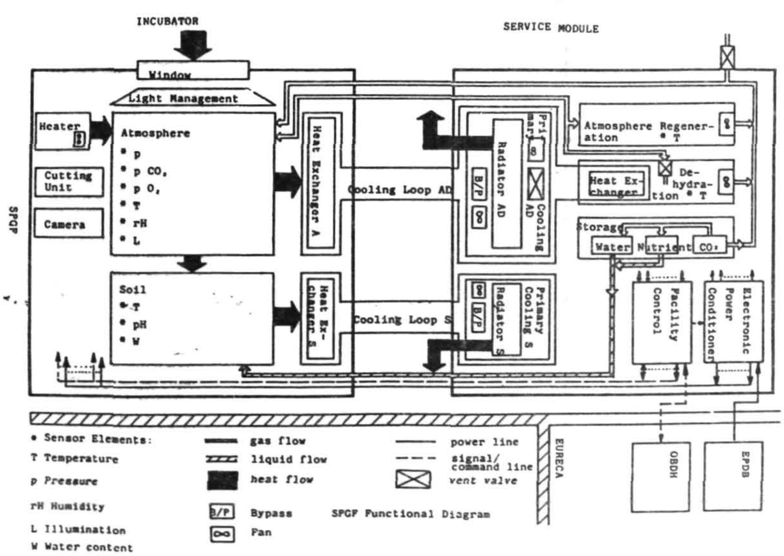


Fig. 9 - SPGF Schematic (Source: ORS)

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